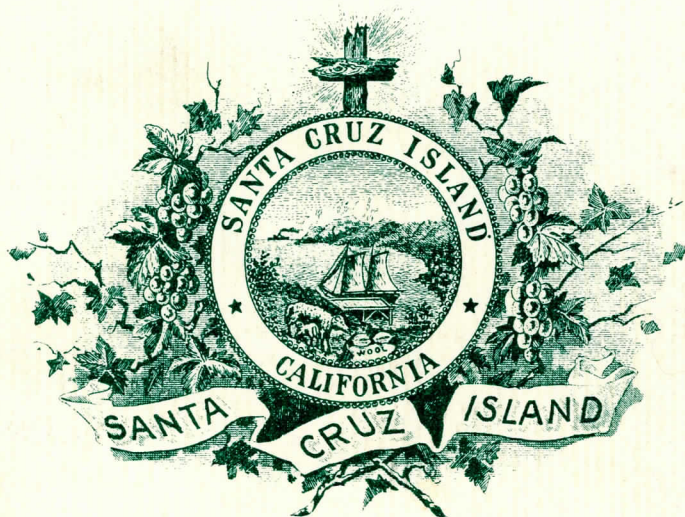


SANTA CRUZ ISLAND

ANTHOLOGY

Edited by Marla Daily



OCCASIONAL PAPER NUMBER 1

1989

SANTA CRUZ ISLAND FOUNDATION



Jeanne Caire and wild geese for Christmas dinner, Main Ranch.

(Helen Caire collection)

CHRISTMAS AT THE ISLAND

By Helen Caire

Christmas at the Island was published in the Winter, 1983 issue of Santa Barbara Historical Society's Noticias.

In 1933, Helen Caire's essay, Christmas at a California-Island Hacienda, won first place in a contest sponsored by The Monitor of San Francisco. It is indeed fortuitous that fifty years later, Miss Caire expounded upon her childhood memories of Christmas time spent at Santa Cruz Island, an event which few have had the pleasure to experience.

It was coming true at last—our dream of Christmas at the Island. Our sojourns were always during the summer vacations, sometimes in the fall or spring. But this was to be in winter at Christmastime!

Several weeks before the day, there were countless confabulations as preparations got under way. Of course, the Christmas tree would be a pine—not the Santa Cruz Island Pine,¹ the remnant of an ancient era. A close kin of the Torrey Pine, it has disappeared from elsewhere in the world. With branches thrust out irregularly, its outline has a rugged look, as though daring the centuries to uproot it. These primeval pines would reject being trimmed; but its forest fellow, the Bishop Pine, full and symmetrical, would lend itself well to garlands and ornaments.

Early one morning my cousin Justinian set out with a workman for the Pinos Chicos, the forest that marches north-westward from Prisoners' Harbor to Pelican Bay; beyond, stretch the Pinos Grandes.

The Santa Cruz Christmas Tree

Hours later, the old Ford rumbled over the bridge, and when it came to a halt before the side gate of the residence

enclosure, we rallied around it with cries of mock-surprise: "Santa Claus! How did you find us here 'way out in the Channel?" and "How did your reindeer turn into a tin Lizzie?" Laughing cheers greeted a full-branched pine when it was unloaded and carried into the house.

Hercules Pico, the regular cook, was on vacation in Santa Barbara, so the temporary cook importantly left his pots and skillets for an afternoon—though his feet "hurt somethin' terrible"—to make a stand for it: a wooden box painted bright green. The rough trunk fitted perfectly into the round hole at the top. Centered before the view window of the living room, the pine stood proudly in its aromatic green.

We looked at it and then at each other with quizzical expressions—the thought in each mind: a fine thing, a beautiful thing as it was. Why trim it? Youthful intolerance, laced with a fillip of Gallic bias, prompted some mutterings of "What a Teutonic notion! to decorate a tree—." Finally, someone suggested, "Oh, come on. It's a Christmas custom we've always had. Let's go ahead!" So untimely prejudice was quashed.

Not having brought the usual decorations from home, we set out in search of ornaments. The clear, brittle air of winter nipped at our warm sweaters and jeans in spite of the sparkling sunshine. My sister Marie, always ingenious in improvising and fashioning things, was bubbling with ideas. From tall eucalyptus trees we picked blue-gray "bells" to be gilded and strung into garlands. Even now, years later, they still retain their aromatic scent. Others we covered with colored foil—red, silver, green, yellow—and tied them in clusters. Still others we fashioned into shining bells of bright glazed paper. Marie painted oak tree "balls" with white lead and sprinkled them with pastel-colored crystals. We gilded the tight brown cones growing on several branches of the tree—"built-in" ornaments which the pine itself furnished.

The weather, clear but cold, made particularly welcome a big wood fire, crackling and snapping in the hearth, sending up clean, good-smelling flames every evening. When the fire was low, we sprinkled kernels in the old wire basket of the corn popper and snapped the cover tightly. Soon the sudden,

surprised hop of the yellow kernels fluffed out in the wire gasket and the smell of popcorn permeated the warm room. Later, there was the buttered batch to munch from a handy bowl while we threaded the popcorn on long strings.

My cousin Lucile emerged one day from secret sessions in her room, holding up the head of old Santa Claus himself. She had drawn the outline on cardboard. For Santa's red coat and cap she fastened Toyon berries; for eyes she chose black seeds from the ligustrum hedge behind the patio, and for a luxuriant beard, popcorn billowed over the lower half of his face. He had a merry look as he topped the tree.

The cook was brought in to admire, and Juan, the saddle maker, too. It was the first Christmas tree on the Island—really a tree of love and happy labor. Now mid-morning or mid-afternoon, the kitchen was redolent of the scent of spices, chocolate, pinenuts, citron and other savory ingredients that escaped the oven to announce that the Christmas cake was baking. My mother had a super culinary gift; under her direction the Christmas feast was sure to be a gourmet's delight.

Several days before Christmas some of us rode, some drove down to La Playa (Prisoners' Harbor) to greet Father Thomas Sherman, who was to be our guest. We were pleased that he had promised to celebrate the three Masses of Christmas. When the schooner *Santa Cruz* came alongside, my father stepped nimbly onto the wharf with the white-bearded padre. He somewhat resembled his father, General William Tecumseh Sherman. The black hat and long black coat looked rather incongruous with his khaki outfit and doe-skin leggings which an Indian had made for him. He was most affable and very interested in the Island, so we all arrived at the Main Ranch in high spirits.

Father Thomas Sherman

Father Tom, a highly individualistic person with definite tastes and ideas, was a most agreeable guest. He was a good conversationalist and had a store of interesting anecdotes to relate. One day at dinner in the long dining room, we asked him about the truth of the Sherman rose story.



The Rev. Thomas Sherman, S.J., on arrival at the island.

(Helen Caire collection)

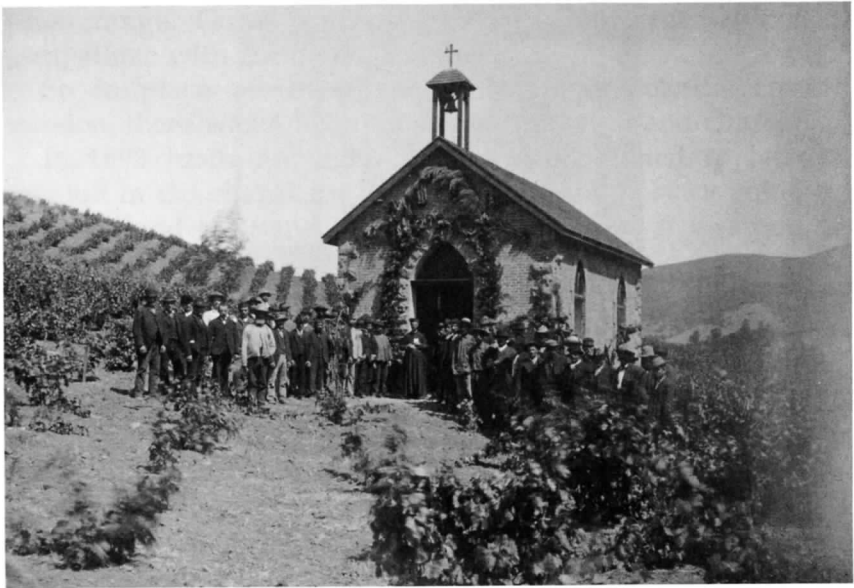
He gave a charactersitic "Pshaw!" Of course General Sherman had met Señorita Maria Ignacia Bonifacio in Monterey, and there was a rosebush climbing on the porch of the house. But there never was a romantic attachment. General Sherman did return to Monterey years later and had a very pleasant visit with the gracious Spanish lady. So the bright flame of truth burnt up the golden straw of a charming but fictitious legend of old California. There is now a bank on the site of the Bonifacio adobe house in downtown Monterey with a plaque commemorating the Sherman rose legend.

In the evening we brought out the cribbage board, used by a former generation of the family, for Father Tom enjoyed the game. My mother played cribbage with the padre, while we chattered, popped corn, played cards or other games, wrote letters, or if it happened to be "schooner day," read the several newspapers which had arrived from Santa Barbara. Kerosene lamps lighted the room, a large one with a painted glass shade on the center table. When our games became too exuberant or

a sudden draft blew across the lamp chimneys from an open door, there were cries of "Look out for the lamp!"—especially from the older generation. Everyone joined in practicing Christmas carols, for Father Tom insisted that we must be the choir. The candles in brackets on either side of the music book were lighted, as Lulu sat down to play on the yellowed keys of the little rosewood piano. It had come from Fance around the Horn long ago, and seemed to have a peculiar sound of sweetness and age. My father's *bel canto* tenor led us in "*Minuit Chrétien* . . ." and other carols.

The Chapel on Santa Cruz Island

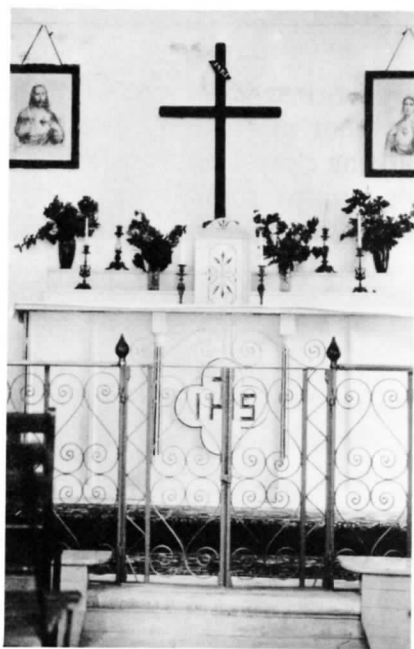
Now the chapel absorbed our attention. Instead of the early Franciscan mission that might have been, my grandfather, Justinian Caire, had the chapel built in 1891 in the style of the one at his family's summer home in the Alps of Dauphiny. built of bricks, molded from island earth and fired at the Main



Santa Cruz Island Chapel, Main Ranch, when a Mission was conducted by the Rev. Jenna, S.J., 1893. From a glass plate taken by Arthur J. Caire. Note the vineyard.
(Helen Caire collection)

Santa Cruz Island Foundation

Ranch, the little building was squared by stone blocks at the four corners from ground to roof. A cross was carved by an expert Italian stone mason in each quoin. The sturdy red brick chapel with its brown belfry, close to a hillslope of the northern range, almost surrounded by the glistening green of the vineyard, presented a tranquil scene. Calls of meadow larks and mourning doves deepened the ambiance of serenity. But now in December the green leaves had turned to scarlet and gold and finally withered in season. The vine trunks stood out gnarled and thick above the plowed eath.



Interior of chapel at Main Ranch

(Helen Caire collection)

A detour down a trail of the past is relevant here with regard to plans for a mission at the island, referred to above. As early as 1770 the Franciscan padres had thought of building a mission on the island.¹ In 1804 Father Tapis broached the subject to Arrillaga, the governor of California, who approved particularly as an aid in putting a stop to contraband. Many

foreigners were smuggling goods, especially sea otter fur, as the names of Smugglers' Coves at Santa Cruz and at San Clemente Islands attest. Since the padres wished to convert the Island Indians, and the Spanish government wished to halt smuggling, an island mission was planned. The Chumash from neighboring Santa Rosa Island were willing to move to Santa Cruz, but would not consent to go to the mainland to beautiful Santa Barbara Mission.

However, chiefly because of an epidemic of measles which raged through the Chumash villages on both islands, the populations were so reduced that all plans for building a mission on the island were abandoned. Instead, the few survivors were brought to the mainland, probably to Mission Santa Ynez.

We wondered why the Island Chumash had not been taken across the channel to the Santa Barbara Mission. Finally we decided that the padres, realizing that nostalgia in daily seeing their islands swimming on the channel horizon would be too much to bear, transported them inland behind the coast range. Good psychology, we agreed, for we could sympathize with the native islanders.

So in place of the projected early nineteenth century mission, there was a late nineteenth century island chapel.

In 1893 Justinian and Albina Caire planned to have a mission in the chapel for the Island workmen, since going to the mainland to attend Mass was not possible. It was not, of course, such a mission as the Franciscans would have built, but a course of sermons and services in the chapel for reviving faith and zeal. Father Genna, S. J., a friend of my grandparents, conducted the mission to which the employes, chiefly Californios and Italians, responded well.

So much for the detour wandering into the past, and time to return to our twentieth century Christmas at the Island.

The Search for "Toyons"

A few days before Christmas we rode over the trails in the hills, armed with shears to find Toyon berries for the chapel, huge crimson clusters for the Bambino's house on His



Riding down to Cañada del Puerto

(Helen Caire collection)

Birthday. Father Tom exchanged his black hat for the straight-brimmed khaki-colored one he had worn as a chaplain in the cavalry. He was not at all disconcerted by the steep, narrow trails in the chaparral of the Colorados, the rolling red range forming the southern boundary of the *Cañada del Medio*, the central valley where the Main Ranch lies.

The largest, brightest Toyon berries ripen on the southern slopes of the range. We tied crimson bunches on both sides of the saddle horns, the clusters of berries reaching over the shoulders of our horses. They objected somewhat, but not disastrously. Then our cavalcade of six or seven returned with hlingling bridles and bright red berries to the high-arched entrance of the stable.

What a good place the red brick stable was with its smell of hay and harnesses and horses! How clean were the tarred

cobbles between the swept planks of the stalls lined on either side! The arch at the farther end opened on a corral almost bisected by a long manger. The hay chute sloped to it from the loft, our best slide when we were children. We always liked the stable. Now it reminded us vividly that in a far land the Christ Child chose to be born in a stable, the humble place of the animals that serve us.

Abelino, the stableman, especially took pride in keeping it in order. He had been at the Island when my young mother and aunts rode on side saddles and wore divided skirts. We could not remember any other stableman. He was not at the Island this December. Rheumatism kept him on the mainland, wistfully looking across the channel. So it was Juan, slight and squinting behind his readymade glasses, who came from the tack room which was called the saddle shop, probably because Juan was a professional saddle maker. He more than willingly left the high seat to his work table, facing a window with a wide view of the barnyard. The *paisano* was a chatty person with an eager "What's doing?" personality. He admired the berries and made other chat as he took our horses.

On our second trip we took the more efficient, if less interesting method for carting Toyons—the Model T Ford. Justy cranked it up for us and stepped nimbly aside, waving us off elaborately with his *sombrero*, as with a jerk, we started up, rattling down the almost three-mile road in the *Cañada del Puerto* to Prisoners' Harbor. There Rafael, newly from Mexico—the regular employe at La Playa must have been on vacation—emerged from the barnyard across the creek. Trailing him along the bridge was a procession of dog, chickens, piglet, and calf.

Greeting us with his sweet, childlike smile, he enthusiastically helped to pick more berries "*por el altar por la Navidad*." We climbed the zigzag trail up the steep slope to the look-out house, used to spy the mast of the sailboat *Star of Freedom* through a telescope before the *Santa Cruz* was built. Not far beyond the small building of weathered wood we found generous trees with heavy clusters on the edge of the chapparal.

When we came down, we entered the garden surrounded by a wrought-iron picket fence in front of the two-story adobe house. We paused to look up at it; it was so charming with green shutters on French doors leading to wrought-iron railed balconies. Poinsettias, flaming in a corner of the garden, had been saved for this feast day, and we took the best blooms. Rafael helped us load our floral cargo into the Ford. While we bumped and rattled on the creek-bed road up to the Main Ranch, we carefully protected our bouquets to keep them from being bruised or broken.

The Santa Cruz Island Chapel

On Christmas Eve, having ransacked the ranch for vases, we decorated the chapel, opening the double doors with a wonderfully long French key. Father Tom had appointed Jeanne sacristan. On the simple altar she laid the smooth linen cloth. Between branched candlesticks, poinsettias and berries flamed in their vases and on the deep sills under the four ogival windows.

Back at the house in the living room we rigged up a confessional with a screen and a footstool for a kneeler, and on the other side, a chair for Father Tom and a table with a candle, casting a shadowy light. Now we were ready for the day.

Berry clusters on both sides of the mantel and on the center table, the fresh greenpine, and firelight glowing on the old-fashioned frames of chairs and high-backed sofa radiated an ambiance of warmth and festivity.

Christmas morning dawned crisp and clear. We shivered as we donned "city clothes" and pulled on our riding boots to keep our legs warm, laughing as we looked at each other in our semi-urban, demi-ranch costumes. Singing carols, we set out for the chapel, two big puppies scampering after us, through the peach orchard, over the bridge, and over the plowed earth of the vineyard. "The first Noel, the angels did say . . ." and "*Gloria in excelsis Deo . . .*" The words of the age-old carols streamed over the fields, over the fertile clods and gnarled vine trunks, while from the little belfry resounded the sweet, mellow pealing of the chapel bell.



The Rev. Thomas Sherman, S. J., Christmas Day

(Helen Caire collection)

We entered under the Gothic arch of the doorway. Early light touched the windows in slanting paths of amber, rose and blue. Beyond the wrought-iron sanctuary railing, forged long ago in the Island smithy, the altar candles blazed in tongues of light; the flowers bloomed for their God.

The Island Christmas Masses

The chapel was filled. Father Tom, at the altar in white vestments, began the first Mass. It did not detract from the

solemnity that his doeskin leggings showed below the alb. Justy, acting as acolyte, looked even taller in his Western boots.

There knelt my father, his shoulders neat and straight, my pretty mother beside him, my sisters and cousins. The ranch hands had filed in, and remained for the three Masses—all of us kneeling before the Myster of the Birth. Rafael had been driven up from La Playa for the Masses. He wore a white panama hat. Winter or not, this was his best hat to be worn on great occasions.

"*Adeste Fideles*. . ."—"Holy Night, Silent Night. . ." The Host was raised before the lights and bright blooms, the Mystery of the Death celebrating the Mystery of the Birth. The second and third Masses followed. The very air of the little chapel was filled with sacred beauty.

At one point our puppy companions which had been barred entrance, pushed in their heads at the door and were swiftly banished. But when we came out, leaving the chapel with its sweet scent of snuffed candles, Bully Boy with the sad eyes and head of a mastiff, and fat, brindle Donnie, sons of old Don, yelped and romped happily.

We returned to the house, our boots avoiding the clods of the dormant earth, and chattered of the gala feast to follow, with roasted wild geese, plump from the grainfields of Christy Ranch at the west end, and other tasty dishes, good wine heightening flavor and enjoyment—all finally capped with our traditional Christmas cake.

First the Feast of God, then the feast of men: This was Christmas at the Island.

FOOTNOTE

1. Hubert Howe Bancroft. *History of California*, III (Annals of Territorial California, 1825-1840) 33-34. Zephyrin Engelhardt. *The Missions and Missionaries of California*, III, 235-54.



Justinian Caire's granddaughter, author Helen Caire, 1989.

(Santa Cruz Island Foundation collection. Portrait by William B. Dewey)